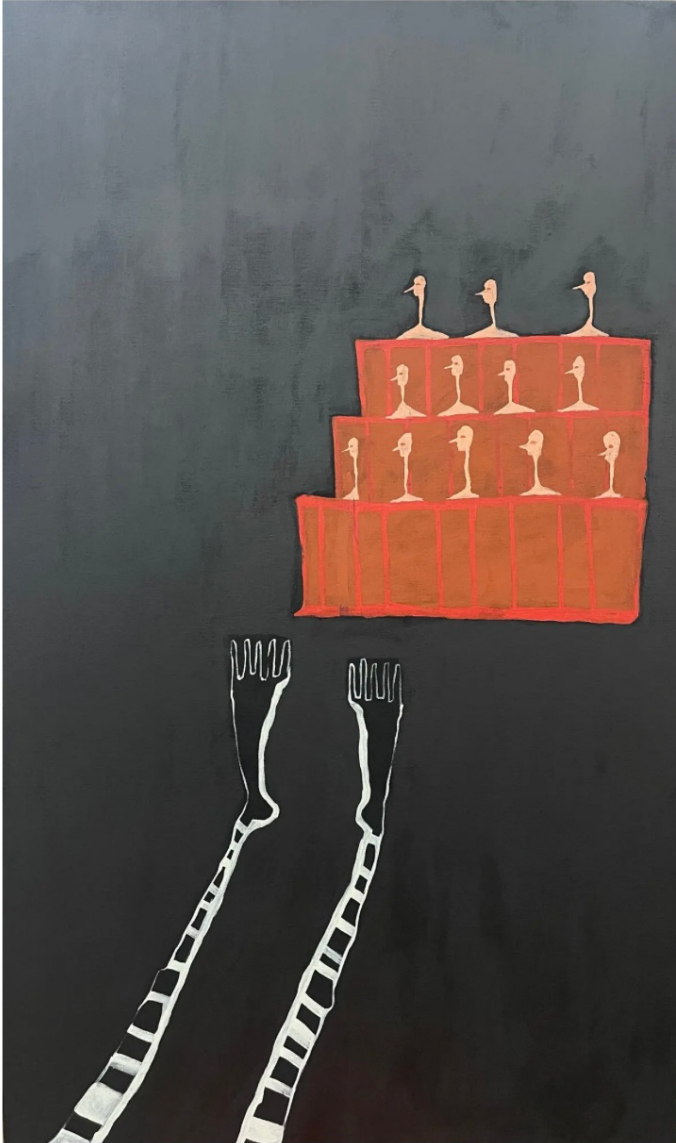


OPINION
GUEST ESSAY

Australia Must Finally Listen to Its Indigenous People

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Mia Boe, "The Trial," via Sutton Gallery

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By Thomas Mayo

Mr. Mayo, an Australian aboriginal activist and author, wrote from Sydney.

If you found yourself in the ocher-colored sands of an Australian desert, listening to the creation stories of Indigenous elders, you would discover that these tales are as marvelous and powerful — in their telling, humanity and spirit — as the greatest dramas by Euripides and Shakespeare.

They are stories of great heroes, floods, rising seas and exodus; of lessons learned from the migrations of wildlife and the shifting of the earth. These oral histories of the deep past — sometimes known as the “Dreamtime” — have been handed down so faithfully over hundreds of generations that researchers believe they [may even describe geographical features](#) that predated the rise in global sea levels after the last ice age.

Within these stories are the accumulated knowledge, culture and heritage of a people who have occupied this southern continent for more than 60,000 years, some of the longest continuous human cultures on the planet.

Yet Australia’s First Peoples are not even mentioned in the country’s modern-day Constitution. Despite being citizens of one of the world’s richest nations, many live in poverty and despair.

Indigenous Australians like me hope this can start to change when the country votes in a [referendum](#) on Saturday. If approved, the measure would amend the Constitution to recognize aboriginal peoples and establish a permanent representative body, the Indigenous Voice to Parliament.

The outcome is far from clear, with recent polls showing that [under half](#) of respondents would vote for the measure, though support is rising. But I remain optimistic. I must.

The white founders of modern-day Australia believed that Indigenous peoples were a dying race and, after Australia gained independence from Britain in 1901, sought to expedite our extinction.

One of the first acts of the new Australian Parliament was to enshrine the [White Australia Policy](#), which barred immigration by nonwhites. Sir Alfred Deakin, who would later become Australia’s second prime minister, wrote off Indigenous Australians as the doomed victims of social Darwinism, [saying in 1901](#) that within a century, “Australia will be a white continent with not a black or even dark skin among its inhabitants.”

Massacres were not [uncommon](#), even after independence, as an expanding white population competed with Indigenous peoples for land and resources. The most recently [documented massacre](#) happened in 1928. Discriminatory policies and laws providing for the segregation, forced assimilation and marginalization of Indigenous peoples continued into the 1970s.

Many aboriginal people still live in overcrowded housing and lack access to clean running water, adequate roads or reliable power. Many are illiterate and, for some, English is only a third or fourth language. Indigenous people are [14 times as likely](#) as other Australians to end up in prison, and their life expectancy is [around a decade](#) less. These statistics are not a reflection of our culture — they are the result of invasion, failed policies, neglect, prejudice and our lack of a voice.

Moving to cities in search of a better life is out of the question for many people who feel an attachment to the lands of their ancestors and a responsibility to stay and care for it or for sick or aging family members. Those who do leave often face racist barriers to jobs or housing.

Our political influence is minute. Of Australia's 26 million people, [around one million](#) are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Spread across a vast continent, we are easily divided and exploited — voiceless in our own land.

Other nations have created the means to listen to Indigenous peoples. In Scandinavian countries, there is the [Sami Parliament](#). In New Zealand, Canada and the United States, First Nations assemblies represent Indigenous views and allow self-determination. Australia must reach this same standard.

In essence, the referendum is about enshrining the principal of listening to us, through a body whose members will be chosen by Indigenous communities and who will advise Parliament and the government on matters pertaining to aboriginal people.

Our voice should be heard, and not just to safeguard our rights and interests. Modern society, with its individualism and alienation, has much to learn from the sharing, generous and harmonious nature of Indigenous ways.

I'm a Torres Strait Islander, from the turquoise waters off northern Australia. I grew up immersed in our culture — fishing sustainably on the shallow reefs, cooking what we caught in a traditional oven dug out of the ground, and celebrating our way of life in song and dance.

As do many Indigenous peoples, we believe there is a [moiety](#), a kinship, between everything — between land and sea, earth and sky, and of course between people. It is a culture of sharing and respect, of laws designed not to punish but to resolve conflict. One of our most important beliefs is that you cannot touch things or walk upon places that are not yours. If only our British colonizers had believed that, things might be different for us today.

The storehouse of knowledge that we accumulated in caring for this ancient land of ours also remains more relevant than ever. The bushfires of 2019-2020, which were so widespread and destructive that they are known here as the Black Summer, [awakened new interest](#) in what could be learned from the First Peoples, such as how we sustainably tended to the land for millennia, understanding [when and where to use fire](#) to protect the land and its animal and plant life. Surely only good can come from listening.

But the campaign against the referendum has caused confusion and fearmongering. In May, an opposition party leader, Peter Dutton of the Liberal-National coalition, said that approval would [“re-racialize” Australia](#). The online trolls emerged from beneath their bridges, and fake accounts and hateful keyboard warriors viciously attack those who express support for the Voice to Parliament. In my years of using social media to campaign for Indigenous communities, I have never seen such toxicity.

Despite the grossly dishonest fear campaign, Australia must vote yes on the referendum — to ensure that ancient aboriginal wisdom endures, to preserve the reputation of the country that we love and the health of our democracy and to give hope to our Indigenous brothers and sisters around the world who also are fighting for their rights.

Australians like to think of their country as the land of the “fair go,” an expression that captures the national ethos of equality and looking after your mates. We must put that into practice.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/09/opinion/australia-referendum-indigenous-voice.html>